THE PERFUME OF THE LADY IN BLACK

By GASTON LEROUX, Author of "The Mystery of the Yellow Room."

To be Continued.)

"He comes to the castle sometimes to sell fish. The people around the village have given him an odd name, which I don't know how to say in their impossible patois, but I can translate it. They call him 'the hangman of the sea.' A pretty name, isn't it?"

The repast was one of the gloomiest in my recollection. The specter of Larsan hovered before our minds' eye; we felt his actual presence.

CHAPTER VI.

Fortifying Against a Weird Foe.

PROFESSOR STANGERSON since he had learned the cruel truth had not for one moment been able to free himself from the thought of it. In truth, the first victim of the affair at the Glandier and the most unfortunate was this good old man. He had lost everything—his faith in science, his love of work and his belief in his daughter. His faith in her had been his religion, joy and pride. And while he was thinking of her almost with reverence he discovered that the reason that his daughter refused to marry was because she was already the wife of Ballmeyer. The day in which Mathilde had decided to tell him the story of the past, which must clear up the present with a tragic light to the eyes of the professor, already warned by the mysteries of the Glandier—the day when, falling at his feet, she had told him the story of her youth, Professor Stangerson had raised the form of his beloved child from the ground and had pressed her to his heart; he had mingled his tears with the sobs of her whose fault had been so bitterly expiated and had sworn that she had never been more precious than since he had known how she had suffered. But he when she left his presence was another man—a man alone, all alone. Professor Stangerson had lost his daughter and his goddess.

He had experienced only indifference in regard to her marriage to Robert Darzac, although the latter had been the best beloved of his pupils. In vain Mathilde, with the warmest tenderness, had endeavored to rekindle the old feeling in the heart of her father. She knew well that he had changed toward her. The professor could work no longer. The great secret of the dissolution of matter which he had promised to reveal to mankind had returned to the unknown from which for a moment the scientist had drawn it, and men will go on, repeating for centuries to come the imbecile phrase, "From nothing, nothing."

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Evidently she was instinctively drawn toward Rouletabille by all the mysterious forces of maternal affection, in spite of the fact that she had every reason to believe that her child had died years before.

She showed for her husband the most charming solicitude. She was attentive to him at every moment, serving him herself, and smiling gently at him as she did so.

If the design of Larsan in showing himself had been to deal a frightful blow to a happiness which had yet scarcely begun, he had completely succeeded. Mathilde had given Darzac at once to understand that she did not regard herself as his wife, since the man to whom she had pledged herself in her early girlhood was still living.

I have said that Mathilde Stangerson had been brought up in a very religious manner, not by her father, who cared little for such things, but by her female relatives, especially her old aunt in Cincinnati. I might have passed over these religious beliefs of Mathilde in silence if they had not had so strong an influence on the resolution which she had taken in regard to her second husband when she discovered that her first husband was still alive. It had seemed to her that Larsan's death had been proved beyond the slightest doubt, and she had gone to her new husband as a widow with the approval of her confessor. And now she learned that in the sight of heaven she was not a widow, but a bigamist!

Leaving the Darzacs, my eyes wandered to the neighbor of Mme. Darzac, M. Arthur William Rance, when they were suddenly arrested by the butler's coming to say that Bernier, the concierge, requested to speak to Rouletabille. My friend left the room.

"What!" I cried. "The Berniers are no longer at the Glandier?"

Readers of "The Mystery of the Yellow Room" will recall that these Berniers—the man and his wife—were the concierges of M. Stangerson at Ste. Genevieve des Bois. I have told how Rouletabille had had them set at liberty when they were accused. Rouletabille had been ever since the object of their devotion. As the Rances had need of concierges for the Fort of Hercules, the professor had been glad to send them his faithful domestics, of whom he had never had reason to complain except for one slight infraction of the game laws, which had turned out most unfortunately for them. Now they were lodged in one of the towers of the postern, where they kept the gate.

The unexpected exit of Rouletabille sent a chill to my heart and seemed to spread a general sensation of alarm throughout the company. Mme. Darzac was very restless. And because Mathilde showed herself to be disturbed and nervous I fancied that Arthur Rance thought that it behooved him to display some little anxiety. Arthur Rance and his wife were not aware of the whole of the unfortunate story. It had seemed useless to inform them of the fact of Mathilde's secret marriage to Jean Roussel, afterward known as Larsan. That was something which concerned only the family. But they were fully aware of the way in which the secret service agent had pursued Mme. Darzac. The crimes of Larsan were explained in the eyes of Arthur Rance by a mad passion for Mathilde, the indications of an insane and hopeless love. As to Mme. Edith, her thoughts, which I read without her suspecting it, ran about in this way: "But what on earth is there about this woman which could inspire such an insane passion, lasting for years and years, in the heart of any man? Here is a woman for whose sake a detective officer becomes a murderer, for whom a temperate man becomes a drunkard and for whom an innocent man permits himself to be pronounced guilty of a felony. What is there about her more than there is about myself, who owe my husband to the fact that she refused him before he ever saw me? What is the charm about her? And yet even now my husband forgets all about me while he is looking at her." That is what I read in Edith's eyes as she watched her husband gazing at Mathilde. Ah, those black eyes of gentle Mme. Edith!

Mathilde asked me where I thought Rouletabille had gone. As she left the dining room I walked with her to the entrance to the fort. Darzac and Mme. Edith followed us. Stangerson had bidden us good night. Arthur Rance, who had disappeared for a moment, joined us while we were at the passageway. The night was clear, and the moon shone brightly. As we passed beneath the arch we heard Rouletabille's voice.

"Come on! One more effort!" he cried, and the voice which answered him was husky and panting. The two portals of the immense iron doors slammed. They were closed for the first time in a hundred years.

Mme. Edith looked astonished at the act of her guest and asked what had happened to the gate, which had always served in place of the doors. But Arthur Rance caught her arm, impressing upon her that she must keep silence.

Rouletabille announced that if any of us had any desire to make a trip to the village we must give it up, for the order had gone forth, and no one could leave the chateau or enter it. Pere Jacques was charged with the carrying out of the command, and every one knew that it was impossible to bribe the faithful old servitor. Pere Jacques, whom I had known so well at the Glandier, had accompanied Professor Stangerson as his valet. That night he was sleeping in a tiny closet in "la Louve," near his master's bedroom, but Rouletabille had changed that, and it was Pere Jacques who took the place of the concierges in the tower marked A.

"But where are the Berniers?" cried Mme. Edith.

"They are installed in the square tower in the room on the left, near the entrance. They are to act as caretakers of the square tower," replied Rouletabille.

"But the square tower doesn't need any caretakers," exclaimed Edith.

"That, madame," returned the young reporter, "is what we cannot be sure of."

He made no further explanations, but he took Arthur Rance to one side and informed him that he ought to tell his wife about the reappearance of Larsan. If there was to be the slightest chance of hiding the truth from Stangerson it could scarcely be accomplished without the aid and intelligence of Mme. Edith. And, then, too, it would be as well beneceforward for all of those in the Fort of Hercules to be prepared for everything and surprised at nothing.

The next act of Rouletabille was to make us walk across the court and place ourselves at the postern which commanded the entrance to the inner court, but at that point the moat had been filled up. Rouletabille declared that he intended to have the moat dug out and to replace the drawbridge.

At the newly fortified postern Rouletabille had stationed no one, for he reserved that place that night for himself. From there he could obtain a complete view of both the inner and outer courts. One could reach the apartment of the Darzacs only after passing by Pere Jacques in A, by Rouletabille at H and by the Berniers, who guarded the square tower at the door marked K. The young man had decided that it would be better for those on guard not to retire that night. As we passed by the oubliette I saw that some one had displaced the circular board which covered it. I saw also on the margin a flask attached to a cord. Rouletabille explained to me that he had wished to know if this old oubliette, which was really nothing but a well, corresponded with the sea and that he had found that the water was clear and sweet, a proof that it had nothing to do with the Mediterranean.

He walked for a few steps with Mme. Darzac, who immediately took leave of us and entered the square tower. Darzac and Arthur Rance, at the request of Rouletabille, remained with us. Some words of excuse addressed to Mme. Edith made her understand that she was being politely asked to retire, and she bade us good night with a nonchalant grace. Rouletabille beckoned us—the men—toward the postern into the little room of the gardener, a dark, low celled apartment. There Arthur Rance, Robert Darzac, Rouletabille and myself without even lighting a lamp held our first council of war.

"We may make our plans here in tranquillity," began Rouletabille. "No one can hear us, and we shall not be surprised by any one. If any person should attempt to pass the first gate, which Jacques is guarding, without the old man seeing him we shall be immediately warned by the sentinel whom I have stationed in the very middle of the court, hidden in the ruins of the chapel. I have placed your gardener, Mattoni, at that point, M. Rance."

I listened to Rouletabille with admiration. Mme. Edith was right. He had indeed constituted himself a captain, and he had not left one impregnable spot without defense.

Rouletabille lit his pipe, took three or four puffs and said:

"Well, here we are. Can we hope that Larsan, after having so insolently daunted himself before us, at our very doors, in order to defy us, will confine himself to such a platonic manifestation? And, content with what he has done, will he go away? I hardly think so, first, because such a thing would be foreign to his character, for he loves a fight and is never satisfied with a partial success, and, second, because no one of us has the power to drive him off. We have, of course, no hope of any help from outside. And he knows it well. That is what makes him so bold and audacious. Whom can we call to our aid?"

"The authorities," suggested Arthur Rance.

The reporter looked at his host with an air of pity which was not entirely free from reproach. And he said in a chilly tone, which showed plainly to Arthur Rance how little value there was in his proposition:

"You ought to understand, monsieur, that I did not save Larsan from French justice at Versailles to deliver him over to Italian justice at Rochers Rouges."

M. Darzac said:

"This man must disappear, but in silence, whether we move him by our entreaties or bribe him or kill him. But the first condition of his disappearance is to keep the fact that he has reappeared at all a secret. Above all—and I am speaking of the heartfelt wish of Mme. Darzac as well as my own—M. Stangerson must never know that we are menaced by the blows of this monster."

"Mme. Darzac's wishes are commands," replied Rouletabille. "M. Stangerson shall know nothing."

Rouletabille arose and exchanged through the window a signal with Bernier, who was standing erect upon the threshold of the square tower. Then he came back to us and sat down again.

"Larsan probably is not far off," he said. "Bernier is on the most friendly terms with these worthy people, and I am going with him to talk to them. The Italian customs officer speaks only Italian, but the French officer speaks both languages as well as the patois of the country, and it is this man, whom Bernier tells me is called Michael, to whom I look to be of the greatest use to us. Through his means we have already learned that the two revenue posts are much interested in the maneuvers of the boat belonging to Tullio, the fisherman, whom they call 'the hangman of the sea.' Old Tullio is an acquaintance of the customs men—the most skillful of smugglers. He had with him this evening in his boat an individual whom the revenue officers had never seen. The boat, Tullio and the passenger all disappeared at the Pointe de Garibaldi. I have been there and found nothing. However, Larsan must have landed. I am sure that Tullio's little boat is anchored near the Pointe de Garibaldi."

"Larsan certainly landed," repeated M. Darzac. "He is at Rochers Rouges."

"In any case, if the boat has been left at Rochers Rouges, he has not come back here," exclaimed Rouletabille. "The two revenue posts are placed in such a manner that no one can pass by, whether by day or by night, without being seen. The sentinel passes between the rocks and the sea. The rocks are steep and form a terrace sixty meters high."

"That is true," said Arthur Rance. "It is not easy to scale the rocks."

"He will have hidden himself in the grottoes," said Darzac. "There are some deep pockets in the terrace."

"I thought of that," said Rouletabille, "and I went back alone to Rochers Rouges after I left Pere Bernier. I had some things to say to Larsan which I did not wish a third party to hear. Well, I went back to Rochers Rouges and called Larsan's name through all the caves. But, whether it was that he heard me and saw my white flag or not, he did not answer."

"Perhaps he was not there," I suggested.

"Perhaps not. I don't know. But I heard a noise in the grotto."

"And you did not enter?" demanded Arthur Rance.

"No," replied Rouletabille quietly. "But you do not think that it was because I was afraid of him, do you?"

"Let us run!" we all cried in one breath, rising at the same moment. "Let us go and finish up the business immediately."

"I don't think that we shall ever have a better chance of meeting Larsan," said Arthur Rance. "We can do what we like with him at the bottom of Rochers Rouges."

"Doubtless," replied Rouletabille, "my promenade to Rochers Rouges produced no result because I was all alone, but if we all go I can assure you that we shall find some results on our return."

"On our return?" echoed Darzac, who did not understand.

"Yes," replied Rouletabille, "on our return to the chateau, where we have left Mme. Darzac all alone and where perhaps we may not find her. Oh, of course," he added as a general silence fell upon his companions, "it is only a hypothesis. But at this time we have no other means of reasoning than by hypothesis."

We looked at each other, and this hypothesis overwhelmed us.

Rouletabille continued:

"You see, tonight there is nothing that we can do except to barricade ourselves. It is only a temporary barricade, for I want the place put in an absolutely unassailable state tomorrow. The vigil will be hard tonight because we are not yet organized. Tomorrow we shall draw up a set of rules for our little garrison, a list of the trustworthy domestics upon whom we may depend with security.

"You will bring here to this cell all the arms which you can gather—rifles and revolvers. We will divide them among those who do guard duty. At 7 o'clock every night the iron doors will be closed. Tomorrow morning M. Arthur Rance will send for builders. Every person on the place will be counted and no one allowed to pass the door of the second court. Before 7 o'clock in the evening every one will be counted again and the work people allowed to go out. In one day the men must finish their work. After that I shall be tranquil, and, Mme. Darzac, who is forbidden to leave the chateau under the new order, having been placed in security, I may attempt a sortie and enter seriously into the search for the camp of Larsan. Come, M. Rance, to arms! Bring me some weapons to pass around this evening. I have lent my own revolver to Pere Bernier, who is keeping guard before the door of Mme. Darzac's apartments."

CHAPTER VII

A Keen Rogue and a Quaint Crank.

AN hour later we were all at our posts, passing along the parapets in the moonlight, keeping close watch. Mme. Edith, who said that she could not sleep, came out and talked to Rouletabille at his postern. He called me, placed me in charge of his postern and of Mrs. Rance and made his rounds. The fair Edith was in the most charming humor.

"It's the funniest thing I ever heard of," she exclaimed. "How I wish I knew your Larsan! I'm sure I should adore him."

I shuddered at the words she uttered so lightly. Ah, if the unhappy girl had only realized what was to come!

I spent two delightful hours with Mme. Edith, during the greater part of which I related to her some facts regarding the history of Larsan-Ballmeyer, some of which had been sufficient to make it doubtful whether he still lived at the time that he appeared to play so unexpected a part in "The Mystery of the Yellow Room." As this man's powers will now be seen to extend to heights which some may believe inaccessible, I judge it to be my duty to prepare the mind of the reader to admit in the end that I am only the transcriber of an affair the like of which never has been known before and that I have invented nothing. I will refer those who believe in actual records to the stenographic reports of the trial at Versailles. And it must not be forgotten that before destiny had brought Larsan-Ballmeyer and Joseph Rouletabille into contact the elegantly mannered bandit had given considerable trouble to the authorities. We have only to open the files of the Gazette les Tribuneaux and to read the account of the day when Larsan was condemned by the court of assizes to ten years at hard labor to be assured on this score. Then one will refrain from smiling because Joseph Rouletabille placed a drawbridge between Larsan-Ballmeyer and Mathilde Darzac.

Ballmeyer did not become a criminal because driven to evil doing by poverty and misery. The son of a rich broker in the Rue Molay, he might have chosen any vocation, but his preferred calling was to lay hands upon the money of other people. He decided to become a swindler, just as another lad might have decided to become an engineer. His debut was a stroke of genius. Ballmeyer stole a letter addressed to his father containing a large sum of money. He took the train for Lyons and wrote his parent as follows:

Monsieur—I am an old soldier, retired and with a medal of honor. My son, a postoffice clerk, has stolen in the mails a letter addressed to you and containing money to pay a gambling debt. I have called the members of the family together. In a few days we shall be able to raise the sum necessary to repay you. You are a father. Have pity upon a father. Do not bring me down in sorrow and shame to my grave.

M. Ballmeyer willingly granted the petition. He is still waiting for his first remittance, or, rather, he has ceased to expect it, for the law apprised him ten years ago of the identity of the culprit.

While he was doing military duty Ballmeyer stole his companion's box and accused the captain. He committed a theft of 40,000 francs from the Maison Furet and immediately afterward denounced M. Furet as having stolen it himself.

Ballmeyer appropriated a draft for 6,000 livres sterling from the messenger of Messrs. Furet Bros., who were notebrokers in the Rue Poissoniere and who allowed him desk room in their offices.

He went to the Rue Poissoniere, into the house of M. Furet and, imitating the voice of M. Edouard Furet, asked over the telephone of M. Cohen, a banker, whether he would be willing to discount the draft. M. Cohen replied in the affirmative, and ten minutes later Ballmeyer, after having cut the telephone wire to prevent further communication and possible explanations, sent for the money by a companion named Rigaud.

Ballmeyer kept the lion's share for himself. Then he rushed to the court to denounce Rigaud and, as I have said, M. Furet himself.

A dramatic scene took place when accuser and accused were confronted with each other in the cabinet of M. Espierre, the judge.

"You know, my dear Furet," said Ballmeyer to the amazed broker, "you must tell the justice the truth. You need not fear serious consequences. Why not confess? You needed 40,000 francs to pay a little debt incurred at the race track, and you intended to pay back the sum. It was you who telephoned?"

"I! I!" stammered M. Edouard Furet, almost breathless with rage and astonishment.

"You may as well confess," said Ballmeyer. "No one could mistake your voice."

The bold thief was detected within eight days and was caught, and the police furnished such a report upon him that M. Cruppi, then attorney general, now minister of commerce, presented to M. Furet the most humble excuses of the department of justice. Rigaud was also tried and condemned to twenty years at hard labor.

One might go on relating this kind of stories about Ballmeyer indefinitely.

Known at various times as the Count de Motteville, Comte de Bonneville, etc., he frequented the summer resorts and watering places—Biarritz, Aix-les-Bains, Luchon, losing in play at the club as much as 10,000 francs in one evening. In his regiment he had made a conquest—happily platonic—of the colonel's daughter. Do you know the type now?

Well, it was with this man that Joseph Rouletabille was going to fight.

I thought that morning that I had sufficiently informed Mme. Edith in regard to the personality of the bandit.

The night passed without any event. When the day dawned I saluted it with a deep sigh of relief. Rouletabille was already in the midst of the workmen, laboring actively in repairing the breaches of the tower H. The work was done so expeditiously and so promptly that the strong Chateau of Hercules was soon sealed as hermetically close as it was possible for a building to be. Seated on a big bowlder in the bright sunlight, Rouletabille began to draw upon his notebook the plan which I have submitted to the reader, and he said:

"You see, these people believe that I am fortifying the place to defend myself. Well, that is merely a small part of the truth, for I am fortifying the place because reason bids me do so in order that Larsan cannot get in."

When I heard a knock at my door about 11 o'clock in the morning and the voice of Mere Bernier told me that Rouletabille wanted me to get up I threw my window wide open and looked out in delight.

Never had nature appeared to me more sweet. The serene air, the beautiful shore, the balmy sea, the purple mountains, all this picture to which my northern senses were so little accustomed, evoked in my mind the thought of some tender, caressing human being. As these thoughts passed through my mind I noticed a man who was lashing the sea. I could not understand what had excited his wrath in this tranquil spot, but he evidently felt that he had some serious cause for vexation, for he never ceased his blows.

At this point I was interrupted by the voice of Rouletabille, who told me that breakfast was nearly ready. Rouletabille appeared in the garb of a plasterer, his clothing showing fresh mortar. I asked him whether he had seen the man who was beating the water, and he told me that it was Tullio who was frightening the fishes to drive them into his nets. It was for this reason, I realized, that Tullio had obtained the nickname of the "hangman of the sea."

Rouletabille went on to tell me that he had asked Tullio that morning about the stranger whom he had rowed about in his boat the night before. Tullio had replied that he had no knowledge whatever of whom the man might be; that he was a crazy sort of fellow whom he had taken in as a passenger at Mentone.

I dressed myself quickly and joined Rouletabille, who told me that we were to have a new guest at luncheon in the person of Old Bob.

Old Bob made his appearance. And—let me say it; let me say it here—it was not this apparition which could have turned our thoughts toward anything dark or gloomy. I have rarely seen anything more droll than Old Bob walking in the blinding sun of the springtime in the Midi, with a tall hat of black beaver, his black trousers, his black spectacles, his white hair and his rosy cheeks. Yes, yes, we sat there and laughed in the Tower of Charles the Bold. And Old Bob laughed with us, for Old Bob was as gay as a child.

What was this old savant doing at the Castle of Hercules? Why did he quit his work and precious collection in Philadelphia?

At the time of his infatuation for the daughter of M. Stangerson, Arthur Rance was regarded by American scientists as the rising anthropologist. His subsequent marriage to Edith Prescott revived his enthusiasm for research, which she shared. When they visited the region of Rochers Rouges the leading scientists of France were moving the government to promote their work, which was yielding great results. Discoveries in the private grounds of M. Abbo, owner of the restaurant of the Grotto of Barma Grande, proved that primeval man had lived there before the glacial epoch, 200,000 years ago.

To be Continued.)